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Together in Tough Times

Abstract: *Four Iowa communities struggling with the changing face of agriculture and subsequent economic woes were chosen as the sites for community conversations about coping with in difficult circumstances.*

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Background

In 1999, the Iowa Institute of Cooperatives approached Ecumenical Ministries of Iowa (EMI) to request assistance for rural communities coping with the latest agricultural difficulties. In the fall of 1999 EMI and the cooperatives invited representatives of Iowa's public schools, churches, and rural cooperatives to meet to discuss the effects on farm families and communities of the impending crisis in agriculture, especially the potential for violence. As result of these meetings, school, religious, and community leaders were alerted to the volatility of the situation, and suggestions were made for helping resources and on how to start constructive dialogues among community members.

At their meeting in September 1999, the Leopold Center Advisory Board expressed concern about the accelerating agricultural financial crisis and the associated stresses on the farmers and their families. The board asked the staff to take some modest steps to relieve the situation, using the director's discretionary funds. The Leopold Center then provided funds to continue the EMI process and actually set up community conversations in some of the hardest hit communities.

Approach and methods

EMI contracted with two people—one layperson and one clergy person—to attempt to jump-start the community conversations. The target communities of Alta,

Denison, West Liberty, and Creston were chosen because of conflict surrounding the local cooperatives and the strength of the local leadership.

Beginning in February 2000, the contract workers met with school superintendents, pastors, and co-op managers. These visits were followed by meetings in each community.

In Denison, it was discovered that the Chamber of Commerce had already hired Renaissance Planning of Omaha to facilitate a community planning process. The participant base in Denison was then broadened to include more clergy, agricultural community representatives, and ISU Extension.

In Alta, exploratory community meetings were held in February, April, and May. Concerns included the lack of a local newspaper, difficulties in reaching members of the non-English-speaking community, mental health issues, and school space issues. As the meetings progressed, community members focused on the second annual Windfest Celebration September 23, which included ethnic foods and entertainment representing the diversity of Alta's citizenry.

Two community meetings were held in West Liberty. The meetings yielded divergent perceptions about the economic health of the agricultural sector and serious difficulties in assimilating Hispanic and Southeast Asian members of the community. In initial conversations about the usefulness of a community dialogue, there were questions about whether this might "stir up trouble." There did not seem to be

Budget:
\$10,000 for year one

much sense of urgency or willingness to assume leadership.

Creston, the community that seemed to be the most obviously hurting, held two initial meetings with a third in the planning stages for spring 2001. A major issue was the growing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” People also were concerned about not being able to integrate newcomers into the community, the lack of volunteerism, no local ownership of industry, and an increasing percentage of low-income families in the area. While the perception of the community participants was that their community was in trouble, this was also the community in which the level of enthusiasm for the conversation process was the highest.

Conclusions

While at least some of the leaders in each community were willing to meet, EMI workers encountered three obstacles to ongoing discussion:

- Lack of knowledge about or denial of economic problems affecting farmers and rural families,
- Concerns about “stirring up trouble,” and
- Lack of urgency with regard to addressing existing problems.

In particular, the failure to feel a sense of urgency had dramatic effects on this project. At the first stages of the project, the sense of urgency was high because of low commodity prices in 1999, predictions of continuing depressed prices, and real threats of violence within the agricultural sector of Iowa. Once the federal government began bailout payments in the spring of 2000, that sense of urgency dissipated.

The farm “crisis” is not, in fact, a “crisis” but rather a substantial change in the agricultural economic structure in this country that will

have lasting effects for farmers, rural businesses, churches, and communities. But without the impetus of a sustained sense of urgency, rural communities may be unwilling or unable to adapt and plan for the future.

Impact of results

As a way to move this community conversation process forward, several organizations in the state are currently working to build capacity to initiate community conversation, frame critical issues, and moderate meetings. These groups include EMI, the Iowa Association of School Boards, School Administrators of Iowa, the League of Cities, the Iowa State Association of Counties, and Positively Iowa.

EMI denominations hope to work with the Iowa Association of School Boards to develop community engagement around student achievement, and specifically around the potential for all children, including low-income children, to achieve at high levels. The Iowa Association of School Boards is in the process of identifying pilot communities for the student achievement effort called the “Lighthouse” project. EMI and the United Methodist Church will be assisting them in achieving the community engagement portion of their work.

EMI will also partner with Positively Iowa to conduct local conversations about the integration of immigrants into local communities. All of these organizations meet together as group called Partners for Learning, whose goal is to increase the state’s capacity for these types of conversations. They have completed four regional orientation sessions (Mt. Pleasant, Orange City, Waverly, and Des Moines) on community engagement and are hosting a Public Policy Institute, which is a three-day community engagement training session, in April.

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